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ABSTRACT

A case study examined the student-teacher relationship in writing conferences to determine how both teachers and students can better negotiate teaching-learning situations. Students enrolled in a six-week tutorial writing course at the University of Michigan were used as subjects. Tape-recorded conversations in the weekly half-hour conferences initially appeared commonplace and casual, and relevant only to the extent of establishing rapport between participants, but were actually crucially important to the writing process. Dave, the subject of the case study, was nervous and rather ashamed of being placed in a basic writing course. However, with each conversation, both student and teacher came to understand conference rules and roles and how to exchange knowledge, which led to a change of understanding for both. The student-teacher relationship was no longer predicated on an existing inequality, rather on inquiry in which both partners equally shared their likes and dislikes. (Transcripts of conference dialogue with one student (Dave) are included.) (KEH)

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Partners in Knowledge: Negotiating a Student-Teacher Relationship

In the Fall of 1988 I taught a six-week Tutorial Writing course for the English Composition Board at the University of Michigan. The course is designed for freshmen whose writing on a 50-minute essay exam is scored a "4" by two readers ("2"s and "3"s place into Introductory Composition; "1"s exempt the writing requirement altogether). The course meets twice a week; in addition, students meet with their instructors once a week for half-hour conferences.

During the last four weeks I secured all 12 students' permission to tape record our conferences. I kept field notes about the class sessions and conferences, and filed away copies of the students' writings. My objective was to collect the raw materials that would enable me to say something about the student-teacher relationships that had developed during the series of conferences. Of the original 12, five seemed especially ripe for analysis, and I have since been interviewing the five students involved.

What is emerging is a set of case studies which say much about the the foundations of the relationships, and the complicated changes they underwent not only throughout the time span of the conferences, but later, throughout the period of the interviews. I have chosen to write here about Dave's and my relationship, which began as a distinctly

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unrelaxed student-teacher pairing, but which developed into something akin to a collegial relationship. I'll forgo here much of what I make explicit in the actual case study: Dave's and my backgrounds, especially our relation to what I call school culture, and the particular academic culture within which we found ourselves together. With the space available, it might be well to point out that he and I share some traits: nervousness, excitability, self-criticalness, and a self-deprecatory humor. The rapport we now enjoy, however, was something earned, not given.

The opening of our first taped conference on September 27 somehow didn't get recorded, but here's a reconstruction of it:

Kathy: What should we do today?

Dave: Well, I thought you'd tell me what I did wrong in my paper.

Kathy: Now why do I have to tell you what you did wrong?

Dave: Because that's your job!

Kathy: Oh, I see....Well, how do <u>you</u> feel about it?

Dave: <u>You're</u> supposed to tell <u>me</u>!

Kathy: Yeah, but I'm going to stand firm on this and make you talk about your paper!

I've given the reconstruction here without benefit of the mood of the scene, because I think that the even the bare words will show what we need to see now. One important facet of the student-teacher relationship is who forms what kind of questions and answers, and how

much conversational mutuality there can be. What seems clear enough so far is that Dave believes I should lead the session. I know from what he said in a later interview that he didn't want to be put on the line like this: he was feeling nervous, "stupid," afraid of looking even more stupid in my eyes than he already was for having placed into a "sped" (special ed) class. From my end of it, I couldn't quite fathom why this guy who had heard me say lavishly complimentary things about his rough draft in a writing group the day before should be so focused on what he did "wrong." I thought he should be broken of that, and of his dependence on my lead. So my seemingly non-threatening "open question" ("What should we do today?") certainly developed into one with plenty of force behind it, and in the face of Dave's insistent refusal to lead, it evolved into something more like a command, which, in its naked form, even surprised me a little.

It's worth saying at this point that upon reading the draft of this paper, Dave balked at the reconstructed conversation. "I wasn't even *that* clear about what you wanted," he said, regarding my recollected command to "make you talk about your paper." From his point of view, he wasn't refusing to lead. To lead or not to lead wasn't even his question; it was mine alone.

In any case, this relationship wasn't to be a battle of wills. With time, Dave had a chance to "find out what you were doing"--I, who was so different from his previous English teachers. Also, our mutual willingness to shift positions some eased the situation. Here's how the next week's session (October 11) opened:

Kathy: How's it going?

Dave: Oh, not too bad, a, did you read my paper?

Kathy: Sure!

Dave: Was it okay, or...you find a lot of mistakes with it? or...I kind of changed a lot of it around.

Kathy: Uh huh. Yeah, I noticed. [pause] Are you nervous about it?

Dave: Um, I'm always nervous when I turn a paper in.

Kathy: Are ya?

Dave: Yeah.

Kathy: [pause] Why? [chuckle]

Dave: Why?

Kathy: Yeah! [chuckle]

Dave: Because I don't know if I did well.

Kathy: [softly] Yeah.

Dave: What I think is good might not look good to you.

Kathy: [pause] Yeah, you do seem kind of nervous about it. I, um, don't mean to do anything to make you seem, to make you feel nervous, um...

Dave: It's just my nature.

Kathy: It's just your nature, huh? [laughs] Okay, well, if it's your nature I guess you know how to live with it.

Dave: [laughs softly]

Kathy: Um, one of the reasons why, though, sometimes, I kind of resist it, I kind of resist answering your questions immediately--well, there's a lot of reasons why. Um, the

first reason why I resist it is that, um, I don't want to um, give you an answer that, um, that won't be accurate and that won't, you know, end up facilitating the improvement of your writing. And, a, if you ask me a question like, well, you know, how is it? Is it okay? I could say well, yeah, everything's just fine

Dave: [laughs softly]

Kathy: no need to do any revision ever...

The first question here comes in the form of a greeting ("How's it going?"), but which could conceivably be understood similarly to my opening question in the previous conference, i.e.: it's your job to get us started. Dave quickly dispenses with an answer to the greeting, and puts the ball back in my court ("Did you read my paper?...Was it okay?"), but interestingly finishes his turn not with a question but a statement ("I kind of changed a lot of it around"). I think he's saying: I did my work, and I'm here for a new response to a new paper. The shift is already apparent: Dave *has* begun taking the lead in talking about his own paper, and I have begun explaining my actions, which have previously seemed cryptic to Dave.

Dave asks for a response to his paper and I give him one, in 45 minutes worth of conference. First, though, I ask a direct question about his feelings that really is this time non-threatening ("Are you nervous about it?"). Dave answers the question directly and easily enough, but when I later ask "Why?", he's surprised. I think he thinks

I should already know the answer ("Because I don't know if I did well....What I think is good might not look good to you"), and indeed, that's just what's operating here for Dave, who felt "stupid" because he thought he had done well on the entrance exam, yet placed into a tutorial course.

But I don't, unfortunately, anticipate his answer. Not until I interviewed Dave after the course had ended did I realize how strongly his placement into Tutorial had affected him. In my response to Dave, I was thinking less about this experience of feeling "stupid" in the eyes of others, and more about alternative perspectives, which my chuckles indicate. Humor is my new way of trying to get Dave to shift, and I think it arose when he said he was "always" nervous after turning a paper in. Is that a position he wanted to maintain? I was asking through my chuckles. When I humorously repeat, "It's just your nature, huh?" and add, "Okay, well, if it's your nature I guess you know how to live with it," the target has changed: now I'm laughing a little at myself for worrying so much about Dave's nervousness, and I'm inviting him to do the same; we are laughing together at ourselves.

I plan eventually to say much more about the role of humor in the development of Dave's and my relationship. It achieves such prominence because we *both* have a penchant for ironic humor: not every student would respond as well as Dave. Sharing an ironic view of the self isn't just a way Dave and I can make ourselves more comfortable in one another's presence. Because irony requires detachment, it can be an analytical tool. Both Dave and I can use it to change our views of

ourselves in our roles as student and teacher, and indeed, as writers and readers.

But there is so much more that brings us together that I want to give at least a brief indication of some of it. A look at parts of the next week's transcripts (October 11) will show both how much our relationship had changed by that time and some of the reasons why. During the last couple of sessions, we had been deeply involved in a paper Dave had written analyzing a John Lennon song, "Working Class Hero." I had happened to sit in on Dave's peer writing group on the day he read his first draft, and I was immediately excited about it, both because of Dave's obvious analytical bent and because, well, I like John Lennon. Dave offered to lend me the "Working Class Hero" tape and I enthusiastically accepted. In the transcript below, before I return his tape, I note another shared interest when I remark upon his University of Michigan jacket.

Kathy: And what, a U of M tee-shirt, too. Well, you're very patriotic today!

Dave: That's right. Absolutely.

Kathy: [laughs]

Dave: Been a U of M fan all my life...sports teams and everything....

Kathy: Oh, I didn't know anything about it until I came here, but I definitely am, now.

Dave: You have to be.

Kathy: [laughs]

Dave: I mean, when you actually come here.

Kathy: Yeah, it is definitely part of the culture.

Dave: Oh, definitely.

Kathy: Well, let's see, what do I have here? No, that's Joe's. Here. [exhibits Dave's Lennon tape]

Dave: Ok.

Kathy: Thank you.

Dave: Sure.

Kathy: I listened to the whole thing.

Dave: How'd you like it?

Kathy: Well, it's not my favorite album of his.

Dave: [laughs slightly]

Kathy: I liked the song that you selected.

Dave: Uh huh.

Kathy: And I liked a couple others on that side, but--

Dave: They're kind of strange. I like "Mother."

Kathy: Um hmm. I like that one, too.

Dave: Did you ever hear "Cold Turkey"?

Kathy: ...Seems like I've heard it but I can't remember it.

Dave: Uh huh. Well, it's really weird. He talks about, a, withdrawal from heroin, and at the end of the song he's like screaming, like showing how painful it is to be withdrawing from heroin. It's pretty powerful.

Kathy: Yeah!...what album is that on, do you know?

Dave: ...Right now it's on the "Shaved Fish" album, but when it first came out it was just a single.

None of the discomfort of the earlier conference openings is present here. It's football season at the University of Michigan, and I am an avid UM football fan. Finding another diehard is a positive pleasure to me, and clearly, to Dave. At the same time, there is still that ironic distance, signalled by words like "patriotic" and "culture"; Dave's ready response shows that he understands the tone. We get even more involved in a mutual interest as we discuss John Lennon's music, and that shared taste extends even to a song in which Lennon screams in pain--certainly not everyone's cup of tea. At one point during a later interview, I handed Dave a summary of this session wherein I describe it as "a semi-serious conversation with a friend." He singled out that phrase and told me he agreed.

I could imagine someone viewing what I have just said as a series of commonplace and not terribly relevant observations. So what? They both like football and John Lennon. What about the writing? My argument, though, is that it is conversation like this that is crucially important, and not just for establishing what might be termed loosely "rapport." In our give-and-take discussion of Lennon's music, Dave and I are equals in a way that we weren't--and couldn't be--in the early conferences. The institution, of which I was a member, had judged Dave a "basic" writer, that is, someone who needed help from someone like me. In addition, Dave and I had only our pre-formed notions of what students

and teachers are supposed to be, and we acted out those roles stiffly. Now we are exploring new possibilities for a relationship. We are forming a link in an academic community, of the sort Patricia Stock and Jay Robinson describe as operating among students and teacher in a writing classroom (1989). Negotiating student-teacher relationships is an especially delicate enterprise. If Dave and I had not experienced an equal partnership at some point, I doubt I would have later felt able to talk so seriously and complexly about evolution and religion, a subject which comprises most of our last two conferences together. I would have feared overwhelming him with my authority, preempting his status as a knowledgeable person and writer. But, fortunately, we had a foundation; we had been exchanging and valuing different kinds of knowledge all along.

Moreover, regardless of the subject matter, Dave and I were always trying out one another's "judgments and accents" as Bakhtin puts it. All utterances are "entangled, shot through with shared thoughts, points of view, alien value judgments and accents" (276). Like two different cultures, or two different bundles of cultures, Dave and I met, identifying our common ground where we could, but testing always the boundaries of mutuality, moving on to "alien" areas where learning could take place. Our dialogue both created and made manifest at least some of those "shared thoughts" that lie lurking in all living utterances. They certainly lie lurking in texts, and the term we use to describe the phenomenon is intertextuality. If Dave and I are ever to share interpretive habits in our reading and writing activities, we will need

to create a text together that admits of a mutual understanding. That we did in our writing conferences.

Perhaps it is no coincidence this is the conference in which Dave really takes charge, and in a way I hadn't foreseen. When we get around to discussing his new paper, he demands to know: "Is there any reason that you can't start off a sentence with 'Whether or not'? Like that?" And I answer his demand immediately--as I would if a friend asked me ("Huh uh. I don't see why not"), thereby becoming the advocate he wants (as his next sentence makes clear--"These jerks from...Introductory Comp were telling me that no, you can't do that, no, that's stupid"). I try to move back to a discussion of his argument on evolution, but as I'm reaching for a book on my shelf, he pulls out another piece of paper, which, it turns out, is something written by someone he knows in Introductory Composition.

Kathy: Ok--what's that little thing? [pointing to a marked-up paper]

Dave: Oh, I just wanted you--

Kathy: [chuckling] Hmm hmm!

Dave: [With energy] Tell me one thing. Is this not a run-on sentence?

Kathy: [reading, quickly and softly] "I was fascinated that this one man could do so many great things, now that I am older" --it's a run-on sentence. [keeps reading] "I still remember..."

Dave: [excitedly] They were telling me it wasn't--it came from Introductory Comp. He told me that's right.

Kathy: [after she finishes reading] That's a run-on sentence. They both are.

Dave: Exactly. And this here: you can't do this, can you? This first sentence [he points to it].

Kathy: [after reading silently] Hmm. What is it that you object to in that sentence?

Dave: Um, well, he was saying that you can do this because of narrative. But it doesn't run smoothly here.

Kathy: Yeah, especially the "not."

Dave: Yeah! I can't understand exactly why he put that in there.

Kathy: Um, if I were doing that--I mean, I don't know why he wants to--but if I were, I think I'd do dashes, um

Dave: Um hmm.

Kathy: because it's so broken up, but I don't know, I don't know if I'd do it exactly that way. But anyway, this is--you're gathering evidence! [laughs loudly]

Dave: Yes, I want to vindicate myself.

Kathy: [laughs] Well, I don't blame you.

Dave: [laughs]

As Dave later told me, what he wanted more than anything was to regain his confidence in himself as a student, an intelligent person,

and as a writer ("I wanted to restore my honor"*) which had been shaken by his placement into Tutorial. His questions to me are as focused and urgent as are his feelings. He now seems to have confidence in his right to ask--even intrude--the questions, and confidence in my willingness to answer as advocate. I am willing to be his advocate *in the way he has chosen*, something I had trouble doing earlier on, when I was worried about his dependence on me and his drive for identifying the "wrong."

There is so much more to say about the development of Dave's and my relationship and its connection to Dave's writing that I am afraid this essay must seem highly allusive. If to be allusive is also to be suggestive, then I can imagine good uses for it. I hope that it might encourage a wide-ranging reflection among writing teachers about what may be happening in their writing conferences and in the classroom. If any nugget of advice can be extracted from this early report on my work, it would be a reminder of the folly of believing that student and teacher are together for the same purposes. I would ask the reader to return to the last conference excerpt in which I am searching for a book as Dave is preparing the "evidence" that will exonerate him in our private mock trial. Even Dave and I, in a close, sometimes collegial relationship, had different agendas: I was focussed sometimes myopically on writing while Dave was deeply involved in removing the blot from his academic reputation--which is not, of course, to imply that Dave didn't work hard on his writing; he did. It is only to point out that writing classes and conferences are never comprised only of

instruction as understood in any straightforward way. They are always rich and protean events, the agents of which are continually forming and re-forming relationships, one with another.

Sarah Warshauer Freedman has also studied writing conferences and has concluded: "We need to help lower-achieving students and their teachers negotiate teaching-learning situations better so that these students do not find schooling counterproductive to learning" (1984, 482). I heartily concur. But I do not agree that the "low-achieving student" might do better if she were "teacher-wise," as Freedman implies (1985, 120). Many of Freedman's comments focus on what the student could learn about implicit student-teacher roles and conference "rules" to make her relationship with the teacher better. I believe that knowledge of rules and roles--along with other kinds of knowledge--is plural: both students and teachers come to a conference with their own versions of it. The kind of empowering pedagogy I wish to practice features an exchange of knowledge, an *exchange* which leads to a *change* in understanding, on the part of both student and teacher. The student-teacher relationship is predicated on an existing inequality, but when both partners are viewed from another perspective, as beings of inquiry, inquiring into our own and others' worlds, we can see that we have always been equals.

*Dave wishes to point out that this was meant humorously.

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